

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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PUTTING "PEP" INTO STYLE

I OBTAINED parking space for myself and a toothbrush in a lodging house." So wrote H. C. Witwer in a personal-experience article published in *The American Magazine*. Where is the reader who would fail to appreciate the freshness and novelty of this expression as opposed to the dreary and commonplace statement, "I hired a room in a lodging house."

The chief secret of Witwer's popularity as a fiction writer lies in the fresh, breezy language in which his tales are told. In fact, he tells us in the article from which the above quotation is taken that his stories aroused no enthusiasm from the editors until he hit upon the device of telling them in the characteristic manner which has now become associated with his name.

It would hardly be accurate to say that they are told in slang—at least if we take the dictionary definition of slang as words and phrases used in an arbitrary sense and "having a conventional but vulgar use." Witwer is least effective when he occasionally descends to such devices. His lapses into the use of familiar slang, such as "Can that layout," and "Don't try to kid this burg," are the low spots in his style—the valleys between his novel expressions and quaint conceits.

Slang, in the strict dictionary sense, rarely is entertaining. It is not slang unless it is made up of conventional, hackneyed allusions. Our fancy cannot be tickled by the remarks, "Twenty-three for you," "He came home soused," "I'll say it is," or "Give him the hook," unless they are used in what appeals to us as an apt but unusual sense. "Give him the hook," was funny to me the first time I heard it applied to an alleged theatrical performer. It was funny again when applied to a platform lecturer, and again, when someone shouted it to interrupt a talkative young man at a dinner party. Perhaps there are still possibilities for applying the term to a new situation—but it is doubtful.

When a phrase once new and amusing is employed in the same

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old way it merely betrays paucity of vocabulary. The mind that originated the phrase probably ceased to employ it long before it was relegated to those who wish to advertise their deadly lack of originality by adopting the current idioms.

It would have been easy enough for Witwer to say, "My room was too small for comfort." He might have resorted to hackneyed slang by saying, "My room was so small that you couldn't have swung a cat by its tail." The first is a commonplace statement, the second is a trite endeavor to be funny. It calls attention to its own barrenness of invention.

He, however, gave the thought a degree of freshness by commenting, "In size and comfort my room was a flagrant infringement on the patent held by the inventor of the sardine can."

It might be objected that the "sardine can" simile itself is rather ancient; but there is sufficient novelty in his method of introducing it to give it freshness.

He adds, "My boudoir was as cold as ten dollars' worth of ice." This is another instance of furbishing up an old and hackneyed simile. The introduction of an absurd standard of measurement makes it read like new.

A few more Witwerisms might be quoted from miscellaneous sources, illustrating the originality of expression which ordinarily lends interest to his style. The reader who has chuckled over one novel expression is sure to read further, anticipating a new laugh in the next paragraph.

"You are the kind of person who could spend a year at the bottom of the ocean and never get acquainted with a fish."

"An innocent bystander would think the couple had only staggered away from the altar an hour before."

"See if you can get the embargo lifted on that food down at the end of the table and ease a little nourishment up here!"

"The lovely Wilkinson seems to have something on his mind and says practically nothing, both when he talked and when he didn't."

"They is one of them rains fallin' that generally plays a week stand before passin' on to the next village."

"They have shrunk till they is hardly enough cloth to accommodate the buttons."

The canny writer seeking to entertain will not depend upon the old familiar conceits to accomplish his purpose. He will be ever on the lookout for effective new expressions and devices for making his statements of fact fresh and sparkling.

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An interesting style, as has been pointed out in recent Student-Writer discussions of the surprise element in literature, is largely dependent upon unexpected turns of expression, novel methods of stating facts, and unusual word-combinations.

Readers will recognize what is sometimes referred to as a "dead" style. What else can be meant than that all surprise elements are lacking? The author never employs an expression that could not have been anticipated. His words are jaded in the uses to which he puts them. They fall lifelessly into their allotted places, plodding monotonously toward some foreordained result.

Nor is any relief afforded by that style which purports to be light and breezy but is compounded of hackneyed slang phrases, threadbare metaphors, and obvious allusions. It is perhaps dangerous to attempt a light, breezy style—for unless it comes spontaneously, there is likely to be little originality involved. But a style which contains truly novel and effective twists of thought and expression never fails to interest an editor. Some writers depend almost entirely upon their ingenuity at thus employing language for their appeal to readers; others use it merely as a piquant seasoning. It rarely can be overdone, if it is well done. According to the proportion of such novelty that he injects into his writing, an author is tacitly graded as "a fellow who knows how to put things in an interesting way," "a clever writer," or "a humorist."

A CONFESSION--AND A CREED

Anonymous

I AM a literary failure.

My sense of story values is good, I am clever at originating plots and carrying them out, I can construct a story so that it is technically flawless, my characters are skillfully drawn, I have a bright, readable style and critics have pronounced my English free from fault—yet my stories are lacking in something.

Oh, yes, they sell. Occasionally they sell well. There are editors who cannot resist skillful technique. But there is something lacking.

It is not always lacking, nor has it always been lacking. When the urge to write first gripped me, I knew nothing of technique. I merely felt the desire for expression. The stories I wrote were crude, but they possessed "that something." Poor cripples though some of them might have been, they were born of the true creative fire. Then, gradually, to a greater and greater extent, "tricks of the trade" replaced inspiration. As I became more skillful it seemed that I lost the old sparkling vigor of thought. Whereas once I viewed with wonder the results of my own labors, astounded and

thankful that I had been able to produce such "masterpieces," I now read my productions with disgust, seeing nothing in them beyond the mere technique by means of which they were produced and fearing that the pretense may be apparent to others.

Yet there is at least one hopeful sign.

In my earlier work, I felt myself a channel through which ideas of dazzling truth and beauty were transmitted. Of late I depend solely upon my objective brain for the ideas. When I now produce a story, it is my own. I originated it, developed the idea according to a well-trained sense of dramatic fitness, calculated the effect upon the reader, and generally have succeeded in producing it, as a manufacturer produces the utility he has conceived.

In other words, whereas I once created, I now manufacture. Creation involves the infusion of something that no finite being ever was able to supply—the breath of life. The mother, though she nourishes, and furnishes the building material and environment for her child, does not create its soul. So with the true writer. He does not originate the work of genius. He receives it from a mysterious reservoir of inspiration. His part is merely to furnish the phrases that cause it to stand forth as a reality.

In other words, he is a channel for great thoughts to flow through. And the same is true of the great inventor (of him, for example, who startles the world with a new principle of mechanics), of the artist, of the real statesman, of the religious leader, of the scientist, even of the business man—of any who serve as truth-channels to a greater or less extent.

I am not sorry that I have become proficient in technique.

Though it has seemed to involve a loss, though it has made me thus far a failure, at least according to my own estimate, yet I know that in the earlier days, when I instinctively acted as a channel for thoughts that I could not have originated, I was a poor channel. I lacked the words with which to express great thoughts; I lacked the powers of construction which would be invaluable to me now in presenting ideas touched with the fire of life.

As it is, I shall continue to write, to grope for that which is lacking. Sometime, I believe, I shall again feel the quickening of inspiration. Sometime, I shall recognize that a great thought is seeking to make of me a channel for its expression. And when that time comes, I shall be ready for it, ready with suitable vestures in which to clothe the idea. I shall know how to present the great thought—when it comes. And the words will be touched with light.

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CRITICAL FRAGMENTS

Fragment 21.

Good advice—advice that is good every time it can be repeated in a different form—is contained in a letter from Ernest M. Poate, well-known writer, to the Detective Story Magazine. In part, Dr. Poate observed:

"In the last analysis, every piece of fiction depends for interest upon its emotional appeal, and that is the answer to your problem of method and motive. No purely intellectual puzzle, be it ever so intricate, can grip the reader as does even a mediocre presentation of the loves and hates and fears of real, living people. The reader identifies himself with your characters, thrills to their emotions, suffers and rejoices with them.

"The writer's real problem, then, is how best to give an affective value to his situations. Let him once do that, and though they

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are commonplace—as common as birth and death and mating—they will still hold his reader's attention.

"And one achieves this desirable end, if at all, by the exercise of restraint. In its restraint lies the only true value of the realistic method. Not pages of slush about the pathos of your situation; maunderings about the pity of a poor, friendless old lady, deserted by her kin, surrounded by the harrowing sights and sounds of a madhouse, weeping her eyes dim while her forlorn soul, questing through the universe for comfort, finds only the hard indifference of sunny skies, singing birds, happy folk, rejoicing in each other and cruelly unsoftened by her sad plight—and all that rot. One can go on indefinitely—it's easy enough, like 'a bunch of daisies at the neck to hide bad modeling'—but, as the devil said, 'it isn't art.'

"No. Set your madhouse on paper, moderately, without exaggeration or comment. Nowadays they're not such terrible places, after all. And then sketch in your old lady; a gray, colorless wisp, another amoeba among the billions of animalculae swimming blindly in the test tube of bouillon which we call the world. Put her into her proper place; bed No. 27 in a row of seventy beds, which, with its legal fifty-seven cubic feet of air space, constitutes her place in the sun. Yesterday there was another old woman there—a fat one. Tomorrow, when she shall have taken the next step along her *via dolorosa*, and lies unstately in the city morgue, clad in a meager, backless shroud pinked about its edges to save the labor of hemming with only the coffin card tied to her wrist to mark her out from the thirty or forty other old husks lying about her—tomorrow, that bed will hold another old lady, equally gray and feeble and senile, equally uninteresting—or interesting. It's all in the point of view.

"But give the setting honestly, and paint the old lady as she is, not with the sordid realism of some writers who see only a hodgepodge of soulless things in a hopelessly middle-class world, without one single touch of beauty, one redeeming feature. I suppose they can't help it; their souls are starved; they lack breadth, vision. They can't see that divine something that hides behind the most unpromising exteriors, to break through once in a lifetime, perhaps, in some queer, illogical generosity or sacrifice—or lunacy. I mean, rather, the realism of Flaubert, of Maupassant. Without dwelling on it, without even mentioning it, they make one feel the humanity of human beings—and that's what fiction is for.

"What I'm trying to say is, if you present your situation skillfully enough, it's quite unnecessary to point out to the reader the places to laugh and cry—like a reported speech, with 'Cheers'—'Laughter'—'Loud groans;' cries of 'Put him out!'—'Lynch him!' scattered through it.

"I'd rather miss my point entirely by lack of stress than to make it by over-elaboration—by insulting the intelligence of the reader with patronizing expositions; making for him the emotions he is supposed to feel. If your situation itself doesn't evoke any affective response, it's unlikely that a page or two of swash about 'the pity of it!' will do it any better.

"You see, I am not of those writers—there are plenty of them, and they ought to know better—who affect a patronizing scorn for the public which feeds them. We, they say, are of superior stuff; the fool public is earthy, sodden, stupid, and must be written down to. It is an error of absurdly naive conceit.

"And here's the explanation. The general public is inarticulate. It feels—at least part of it thinks; but it can't talk. Now and then a vocal person is born; and it's that vociferous tenth which provides our writers and other pests. Being gifted with the ability to express themselves; shamelessly to analyze and lay bare the workings of their poor little souls—such folk account it to themselves as virtue. Because they can express shades of emotion, they publish it abroad that they are sensitive spirits, finely organized, capable of a depth of feeling denied to coarse, common clay. Umphf! They forget that all they can do is to talk about the emotions which are common to humanity. Let them—if they could—set forth an emotion which others do not know, and their audience yawns and drops the book. They forget, also, that deep feeling is mute; that by their very logorrhoea they confess their superficiality. One does not talk of those things which really stir the soul.

"Wherefore, the more simply a situation is set forth, the more surely will the reader react to it; provided it has a real affective value. Which brings us back to the beginning—that fiction depends for its interest upon its emotional appeal."

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